

MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Derwood Residents Rally Against Highway

Protesters Survey Denuded Woods in Their Push to Halt Intercounty Connector

By DONNA ST. GEORGE
Washington Post Staff Writer

At the edge of their neighborhood's fallen woods, residents of Montgomery County's Derwood community rallied yesterday against construction of the intercounty connector, insisting there was still time to stop the long-debated six-lane highway.

Many of them wearing forest-green T-shirts reading "A Wake for McCo," they hoisted placards as they spoke out, marched and took aim at Gov. Martin O'Malley (D), whom they blamed for allowing the \$2.4-billion highway project to proceed.

They called their event O'Malley's March, invoking the name of the governor's onetime Celtic rock band, and used the theme of an Irish wake. A bagpiper played, and a crowd of 80 people looked somberly upon a swath of cut-down trees, not far from backyard grills and suburban decks.

The site has been slated to become part of the highway.

"We're all stuck paying mortgages in what was a beautiful place," said Connie McKenna, president of the Shady Grove Woods Homeowners Association, which organized the event. "We trusted our government to look out for us. . . . They failed us here on Briardale Road."

More than 12,000 homes, McKenna said, are within 500 meters of the 18.8-mile project. She and other critics say the project will cause environmental damage without relieving traffic. This highway is going through established communities. It's not a bike path. It's like I-95. It's like the New Jersey Turnpike," she said.

State officials say the roadway, which extends to the Laurel area in Prince George's County, will



With an Irish wake as the theme, bagpiper Steve Porter leads protesters in a march through affected Derwood areas.

ease east-west traffic congestion beyond the Capital Beltway. It is scheduled to open in segments, starting in 2010. A federal court recently ruled in favor of the highway, but an appeal is pending.

The state has spent \$300 million to plan and design the toll road and buy land for it, and has awarded \$1 billion in contracts.

Derwood is one of the first areas to be substantially affected by the project, and residents there invited people from other communities to get an early glimpse of what the project will bring. Residents came from Olney and Washington Grove, from around Georgia Avenue, from near Colesville Road.

Derwood residents said it made all the difference to see the project as a physical reality rather than a diagram. "I think seeing the actual trees being taken out was a wake-up call that it was real," said Keith Fournier, 32, who lives in Shady Grove Woods.

It has inspired activism in the community, which residents said they hope will spread.

Paul Sevier, 56, said he lost three-quarters of an acre of his Rockville area yard to the highway, and he held a sign to let others know what was at stake in his neighborhood: "1,223 Trees. Sycamore Acres."

Sevier and many others said few officials have heeded concerns

about harm to air quality and considered how that will affect children growing up in the shadow of the highway. "I just don't think that's being listened to," he said.

Two elected officials at the event said the project was ill-conceived. Del. Saigah Ali (D-Montgomery) and Montgomery County Council member Marc Elrich (D-Al Large).

Elrich said the highway was at odds with the council's recent actions to limit energy consumption and reduce greenhouse gases.

"We took bold steps in one direction, and then we make great mistakes we can't possibly correct in the other direction," Elrich said. He urged residents to get in-



Oliver Lee, 13, walks alongside a site that was once wooded. "I've been in these woods all my life," he said. "It's like a second home to me."

volved and said there was still a chance that "this road will crash and burn."

That is exactly what many in the crowd said they hoped for.

There was Oliver Lee, 13. "I've been in those woods all my life," he said. "It's like a second home to me. Me and my friends, we used to wander them all the time. It's horrible to see them cut down like

this."

Another resident, Rich Berg, 63, said he worries about noise, pollution and loss of property value. For 15 years, he said, he has enjoyed the quiet wooded area just beyond his property. "It's going to disappear," he said. Soon, "I'll be able to walk out my front door and look at a six-lane highway or a brick wall hiding it."